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ABSTRACT

A cooperative learning model was used in Florida to change the state-mandated grade 12 course called Family Life and Sex Education, which had been found deficient in meeting students' educational and social needs. Pretest data before the change in model indicated a lack of knowledge that had a detrimental effect on thinking and problem-solving ability. A reading questionnaire indicated students did not read an adequate amount of materials to increase their knowledge. Classroom observations showed that many did not interact in a productive manner, display satisfactory work habits and study skills, share ideas and work, network, cooperate, or communicate. Possible contributing factors to ineffective instruction included the following: (1) a technical and anatomy-based curriculum not structured toward the more important emotional and social issues; (2) textbook and materials that lacked relevant, contemporary information in an exciting, interesting format; (3) few provisions for alternate teaching methods; and (4) inadequately trained teachers. The cooperative learning model was designed to develop students' educational, social, and lifetime skills by motivating them with personal and group responsibilities. The cooperative reading and writing project increased appreciation for reading information on family life and human sexuality. Students felt more comfortable in small cooperative learning groups that provided intrinsic, social, and ego-integrative motives. The small cooperative groups also positively affected all students' academic achievement, increased information retention, and enhanced self-esteem, social acceptance, and development of social and lifetime skills. (Contains 13 references.) (YLB)

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Meeting the Educational and Social Needs of the Students in Senior Family Life Class Through Cooperative Learning

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Summary of Practicum I Report
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Abstract

A school district's Family Life and Sex Education course may not be educationally or socially beneficial to the senior students. This project addresses a solution for this problem, where senior students show a lack of content retention in the Family Life and Sex Education class along with little or no interest in the course readings and are demonstrating a lack of ability to write a composition. This solution is effective when students are demonstrating unsatisfactory ability to think and problem solve along with a lack of social skill development. Analysis of the data revealed that a cooperative learning model would be effective for students of all academic levels, social skill ability, gender, ethnicity, and economic status.

Key Words: cooperation, networking, family life, sex education, learning models

Introduction

In this state, the Department of Education mandates that a course in Family Life and Sex Education be taught in the public schools. The support for this requirement is due to the assumption that an increase in knowledge on human sexuality can be effective in reducing the negative consequences of early sexual activity along with reducing the rising rate of marriage failure. Haffner (1992), Haynes (1993), and Scott-Jones (1993) have documented that effective family life and sex education is essential and needed in our high schools to improve the quality of the students' lives and to adequately prepare them for adulthood in today's society.

In this writer's school district, the course of Family Life and Sex Education is a significant part of the Health Education curriculum. The problem was that the high school's Family Life and Sex Education unit was not beneficial to the senior students. The educational and social needs of the students in the 12th grade course were not being met. Many of the students were showing a lack of content retention by way of unsatisfactory classwork and test grades. Most of the students were showing little or no interest in the course readings and were demonstrating a lack of ability to effectively write a composition on an issue dealing with family life or human sexuality. Also, many students were demonstrating unsatisfactory ability to think and problem solve many issues related to the subject matter. Compounding this problem was the fact that some students were demonstrating a lack of social skill development, displaying unsatisfactory interpersonal and intergroup relationships, along with a lack of classroom cooperation, ability to compromise, and ability to network.

Problem Documentation

Hard data gathered from a pre-test indicated that half of the senior students scored below the acceptable level of 76% on a Family Life and Sex Education knowledge test. This lack of knowledge had a detrimental effect on their thinking and problem solving ability when faced with a situation in the area of human sexuality.

A student reading questionnaire had indicated that the students basically like to read but do not spend much time reading. The mode or frequently occurring amount of hours spent reading by the students per week was two hours. This survey also confirmed that the students were not reading an adequate amount of materials to increase their knowledge on issues of human sexuality. In addition, this survey indicated that magazines were the type of reading resource that most students found interesting and pleasurable.

Classroom observations of the students had provided significant evidence that many of the students were not interacting in a productive manner and were not displaying satisfactory work habits and study skills to increase their knowledge on the subject matter. The students were not sharing their ideas and work, they were not networking, cooperating, communicating, and were having problems with their classroom behavior and controlling their anger. In addition, a survey of other Family Life and Sex Education instructors had affirmed similar findings of these problems along with confirming unsatisfactory student writing skills and time management skills.

Causative Analysis

There were a number of possible contributing factors to this problem of ineffective family life and sex education instruction and why it was not adequately meeting the needs of all the senior students. The Family Life and Sex Education curriculum was too

technical and anatomy based instead of being structured toward the more important emotional and social aspects. The current textbooks and reference materials were not providing the students with relevant and contemporary information in an exciting, interesting, and pleasurable manner. Overall, the curriculum provided few provisions for alternate teaching methods and approaches in an effort to reach and educate all of the students on the subject matter and on lifetime social skills.

Most of the physical education teachers who were instructing the Family Life and Sex Education classes were not adequately trained or prepared to effectively instruct the course. Some teachers had also indicated that they were uncomfortable teaching the subject matter while others had indicated that they lacked the necessary resource materials. In addition, the teachers were not structuring the course to provide sufficient amounts of individual and group interaction that encouraged and taught the students how to interact and get along properly. A great deal of classroom time was geared toward the direct instructional approach to family life and sex education.

Goals and Expectations

The projected goals and expectations for this project were that all of the senior students would receive interesting, relevant, and meaningful family life and sex education instruction. The needs of the high-risk and special educational students would be met with quality instruction and high expectations. The needs of the minority students would be met conducive to their cultural beliefs and values. The needs of the gifted and talented students would be met with quality and challenging instruction. All of the students would acquire subject matter knowledge that would allow them to think and problem solve situations and issues associated with human sexuality. The senior students would

successfully achieve the reading and writing skills associated with the family life and the human sexuality aspects of the course. Students would demonstrate social skill development by displaying positive interpersonal and group relationships. The students would also develop lifetime skills by displaying ability to cooperate, compromise, network, and manage their time efficiently.

Description and Justification for Solution Selected

The literature offered an array of possible solutions on structuring effective family life and sex education instruction to meet the needs of all the students. The most appropriate solution for this writer's situation was to incorporate a cooperative learning model into the current unit that would develop the students' educational, social, and management skills.

There was strong evidence that indicated why this selected solution of cooperative learning would be successful. According to research by Sharan (1980), Slavin (1983), and Johnson and Johnson (1989/90), cooperative learning produces positive effects for students in the areas of academic achievement, self-esteem, intercultural relationships, social acceptance of mainstreamed children, and social skill development. Research by Augustine, Gruber, and Hanson (1989/90), reinforces this disclosure with documented evidence that indicates, "cooperative learning can benefit all students, even those who are low-achieving, gifted, or mainstreamed," (p. 4). Further, Swiss educational philosopher Jean Piaget emphasized the importance of social interaction and identified it as necessary for the cognitive development of students, (Parker, 1985). It is important that students learn to work cooperatively with their classmates. Students must be willing and able to interact properly and learn in cooperative manners in school and other areas of life if they

are going to adjust and function constructively in society, (Lindblad, 1994). Schultz (1989/90) noted that by students working cooperatively with others, they take an active role in their learning and enjoy an equal chance for success and recognition. Sharan and Sharan (1989/90) indicate that when students constructively communicate and cooperate in an effort to carry out a task, they achieve more than they would as individuals, and the work is richer than if the same work was done individually by the same students.

The specific cooperative learning project that was implemented was a student developed family life and sex education resource book. All of the students were responsible for the selection, research, and summarization of four quality resources in accordance with their group's selected topic, thus fulfilling the project's individual goals. The students in the small groups were responsible for working cooperatively to structure and organize their work, which was developed into an individual chapter of the family life and sex education resource book. This accomplishment was to fulfill the group goals of the project. The small groups were responsible to work cooperatively in correlating the resource book, thus finishing the class project and fulfilling the overall class goal. When the family life and sex education reference book was completed, a copy was provided for each individual and the students began to fulfill the last stage of the project, which was to share and discuss their new acquired information.

Discussion

To achieve the specific outcomes in this practicum, the existing traditional method of instruction had to be reconstructed in order to meet the educational needs of all the students and to help meet the social challenges for the workforce in the year 2000. The

senior family life and sex education instruction was revised to meet the challenges, requirements, and changes of today's adolescent. In addition, a cooperative learning model was developed which changed the traditional classroom of teacher-lecturer to teacher-facilitator while students were given more choice in decision making. Two cooperative learning models, the "Group Investigation Model" (Sharan and Sharan, 1989/90) and the "Cooperative Integrated Reading & Composition Model" (Stevens, Madden, Slavin and Farnish, 1987), were used in combination to design a learning model to reach the expected student outcomes in the family life and sex education classroom. This cooperative learning model was designed to develop the students' educational, social, and lifetime skills by motivating them with personal and group responsibilities. This approach was personalized with individual goals and socialized with small group goals and an overall large classroom goal. There was strong evidence that indicated this multi-goal approach would be effective. Slavin (1990) indicated that in order for a cooperative learning design to be most effective, two essential features need to be structured. One feature is group goals or positive interdependence. The cooperative groups must work together to earn the results. The second essential feature is individual accountability or a personal goal. The group's success must depend on the individual achievement of all group members.

As the students began to gather, research, and summarize the family life and sex education information necessary to fulfill their individual project goals, they began to organize the information and their thoughts onto paper. When they shared the information with their classmates, they began to analyze the information along with their thoughts.

With this cooperative reading and writing project the needs of the children were addressed. The Family Life and Sex Education course conformed to the individual instead of the individual conforming to the course. The result was an increased appreciation for reading information on family life and human sexuality, connecting the students' interest and experiences to the world of literature through the process of reading and writing.

As students begin to become successful in the process of reading and writing, they will develop an increased liking for reading and writing. Connecting students to vital information is critical if they are to become well informed and competent problem solvers in the complex society in which they live and the world lies ahead.

With the use of cooperative learning groups, students were made to feel more comfortable then in the traditional classroom lecture design. The small groups provided the students with many motivational factors. Intrinsic motives such as curiosity, interest, and intrigue were evident by their concern and enthusiasm. Social motives were also evident by the demonstration of teamwork. The students wanted to do their part and not let their group down. When group members acknowledged or praised the contributions of other members, ego-integrative motives were stimulated (Davidson and O'Leary, 1990) in that the students developed a sense of power or competence in their own abilities to think, reason, and problem solve. This motive allowed the students to contribute even more to their group's effort. As group members began to communicate, network, and share their ideas, they began to develop mutual respect for each other which crossed the boundaries of gender, race, social class, and ethnicity.

The small cooperative groups caused positive effects in the academic achievement of all the students, as indicated on a post-test. It allowed for an increase in information

retention along with enhancing self-esteem, social acceptance, and the development of social and lifetime skills.

The quiet, introverted students in the class began to take part more in the project as they were praised and encouraged by their group members, the teacher, and members from other groups. The development of a trust factor was evident by way of their networking and sharing actions. The teamwork had a direct effect on their social skill development.

Prior to implementation, most of the gifted and talented or honor students did not show signs of acceptance or wanting to work with the students that were not on their academic level or those they perceived as non-achievers. Clearly, the teamwork indicated that these honor students learned to accept the other students, seeing beyond the labels to the person within. These students were very instrumental in helping the mainstreamed students with their work. This teaching-learning experience provided these students with an excellent role in leadership and cooperation. Also, some friendships developed in class while other students at least developed a respect for the students that they were not communicating with prior to the implementation of this learning model.

This learning design has demonstrated that student achievement is at least as high if not higher with the use of cooperative learning activities as it is with a traditional classroom learning activity. This learning design also allowed all of the students an equal chance for recognition. It promoted positive interpersonal relations, increased self-confidence, motivation, and improved behavior and attendance. These positive factors took place along with the understanding of subject matter. Sharan (1980) has shown that

continued experiences with cooperative learning activities can increase the ability of the students to work efficiently and effectively with others.

With all of these positive factors occurring from this cooperative learning project, many of the students began to enjoy and take an interest in the Family Life and Sex Education course. This student enjoyment of class can trigger an increased liking of school, activating achievement. The stimulated student achievement can lead to success in school and ultimately success in life.

This cooperative learning design allowed the students to take part in their educational process. When they were given some voice or control over their learning, provided with guidelines and assistance, given recognition, praise, and responsibility, powerful and creative teaching and learning took place in the family life and sex education classroom.

The cooperative learning experience of this group designed project demonstrated the potential that diverse thinking can have in the classroom. Educators can create classrooms and schools that are cooperative in design and ultimately we can create a society where people are well informed and can work well together for common goals and equality.

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